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ADDRESS

By PHILIP VAN NESS MYERS

At the Commencement Exercises of the Ohio Military Institute, May 28, 1917 College Hill

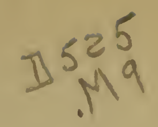


I should do justice neither to what I believe to be your feelings nor to my own should I at this hour and in this place attempt to speak on any other subject than that which is uppermost in the minds of us all, namely, the world war, to the carrying on of which to a victorious issue we, as a nation, have solemnly dedicated all our resources, national and spiritual.

It is only slowly that we have come to realize the seriousness and the profound significance for civilization of this titanic struggle which has now involved the greater part of the civilized world. Just as when the Reformation of the sixteenth century, which was destined to open a new era in history, was inaugurated by Luther, the movement was looked upon by the papal court, which it so vitally concerned, merely as "a squabble of some monks," so on the outbreak of this great war many among us were inclined to regard it, to use the words of an eminent English statesman, as merely "an ignoble scrimmage" among the European nations, generated by dynastic ambitions, commercial jealousies, and conflict of colonial interests.

But the startling events of the past three years have clarified the situation and revealed the great convulsion as a stupendous conflict between elemental forces emerging from the very heart and center of things; as an un-

[1917]



paralleled crisis in the history of civilization. We now see that everything of supreme spiritual and moral value gained by slow increments through thousands of years of painful progress, everything that makes life worth living, everything that holds the blessed potencies and promises of the future of humanity is set in imminent peril.

The immense issues involved have lent unique significance and epic interest to all the events of three tragic years. Into this brief period that measures the course thus far of the great war have been crowded more supreme events, more events that will constitute high points in history to the end of time, than are recorded in the two thousand years since the darkness which veiled the divine tragedy outside the walls of Jerusalem. Through what our eyes have seen and what our ears have heard, we have been made, as it were, contemporaries of all that is greatest and most thrilling in history—made contemporaries of the supreme loyalties, heroisms, renunciations of all the great days and crises of man's past. As witnesses of the heroic resistance of the Belgians to a lawless and ruthless invasion of their sacrosanct land, we have been made contemporaries of the heroes of Marathon and Thermopylae, and have felt the thrill that was felt by the Greeks in those epic times. For than that brave resistance there is nothing nobler in all the rolls of history. Belgium, by that act of loyalty to duty, by that act of self-sacrifice saved not only her own soul; she saved France, the beloved of nations; she saved civilization; she saved and invigorated our faith in human nature; she added another tradition to those imperishable traditions of disdainment of advantage and of life purchased by dishonorable act—glorious traditions that make up the priceless possessions of humanity.

As witnesses of the battle of the Marne, where, by some untold miracle like that which once wrought the deliverance of France through the mystic maid of Orleans, the myriads of German invaders, welded into the mightiest war machine ever forged on this earth, were hurled back in fatal defeat from before menaced Paris—as wit-

nesses, of that battle, which has justly been called the most decisive of the decisive battles of the world, we have been made contemporaries of all most stirring in the war-annals of history.

As witnesses of the democratic revolution in Russia, which in a night overturned the centuries-old throne of the cruel, despotic Romanoff, we have been made contemporaries of the great French Revolution of 1789. For that revolution in which we have in sympathy participated, is, we believe, freighted with ultimate consequences, political and social, as profound and far-reaching as those of that revolution in France which, until 1914, held the central place in European history.

As participators in the decision reached by our chosen leader, President Wilson, which decision with unforgettable words consecrated all that this mighty nation has and all that it is to the defense of imperiled democracy and civilization—as participators in that decision we have had lot and part in a more momentous decision than that made by the champion of truth and spiritual freedom at the ever-memorable Diet of Worms, when, defying the power of a tyrannical spiritual autocracy, and announcing that irreversible decision that saved religious liberty in Europe, he declared, "Here I stand; I cannot do other; so help me God." For, as a recent writer says, "What moved the President [to that decision] was a recognition of the fact that the human race had again reached one of those decisive hours in which will be determined whether the toilsome march of civilization is to be continued or instead there is to be a world-wide reversion to barbarism."

It was a quick recognition of that decision as epoch making, as doubtless the most momentous decision in all history, which caused England to fling out alongside the Union Jack of Britain from the high tower of the Parliament Building at Westminster the Stars and Stripes —"the first time," it is said, "that a foreign flag was ever displayed from that eminence."

And what were the causes of this war, the most unprecedented, the most stupendous, and the most fate-

laden war of all the wars of recorded history, and what are our reasons and our purposes in taking part in it?

We shall not understand the underlying cause of this tremendous conflict; we shall not get the right perspective of its events; we shall not discern its place in the great evolutions of history, until we have come to see that this world-war is the culmination of the tremendous conflict begun in the seventeenth century between absolute monarchy and democracy, the final act in the great drama of the French Revolution of 1789. That revolution was the travail of a new birth of humanity. It heralded the passing of old oppressive, divine-right monarchies, and the incoming of democracies, of constitutional parliamentary government. In only a little more than a century the liberal ideas let loose by that vast upheaval had made conquest of a great part of the world. Even the ages-old absolute monarchies of Asia, Japan, China and Persia felt the transforming influence of these ideas, and were wholly or in part democratized. So rapid, in truth, had been the democratization of the world that there was good reason for that optimism which marked the period just preceding the outbreak of the present war, and which conceived humanity, set free from the injustices, repressions and tyrannies of the past, as now entering upon a new and happy era of freedom and justice. The world was elate with hope, and exultant in the promised realization of the dream of all the ages—a golden era of universal peace and of international fraternity and goodwill.

Unhappily, there remained in Central Europe, practically untouched by the great democratic movement, a stronghold of ancient divine-right autocracy. The House of Hohenzollern, the creator of modern Prussia, remained the representative and upholder of the old discredited regime of government. It denounced the democratic doctrine of government by the people; it extolled war, even aggressive war, as a divinely ordained agent of human progress. The present head of this dynasty, using the language of the mediaeval divine-right autocrats whose impious assumptions and cruel tyrannies provoked

the French Revolution, has declared: "On me, as German Emperor, the spirit of God has descended. I am his weapon, his sword, his vicegerent; woe to the disobedient." And again: "Only one is master of this country; that is I. Who opposes me, I shall crush to pieces. . . . . We Hohenzollerns take our crown from God alone, and to God alone we are responsible in the fulfillment of duty."

This is exactly the language of the pre-revolutionary Bourbons of France and of the divine-right Stuarts of England.

It is the mediaeval ideal of government, the mediaeval mode of thinking shown by these declarations, which disclose the deep-lying cause of the stupendous struggle begun in Europe in 1914.

Putting aside the occasion of the great war, the assassination of the Crown Prince of Austria; putting aside the immediate cause, Austria's unreasonable demands and brutal assault upon Serbia; putting these aside, the fundamental cause of the war was the existence in Central Europe of a war-mad, mediaeval, divine-right autocracy wholly uninfluenced by the generous ideas and ideals of the great democratic movement of the past two centuries, an autocracy which, intoxicated by the success of many aggressive wars that had consolidated its power and given it the headship of Germany, aimed, through a policy of "blood and iron," to secure dominion first of Europe and then of the world at large—in the words of President Wilson, "to impose its will on the world by force."

Admittedly, there were many secondary and contributory causes, but none of them would have brought on this unparalleled catastrophe had Germany been a democracy, had the German people been masters in their own house, had there been on those fatal July days of 1914, democratic goodwill, a sincere desire for peace in the chancellery of Berlin as there was in the chancelleries or London, Paris and St. Petersburg. This, we believe, will be the irresistible verdict of history regarding upon whom rests the monstrous guilt of precipitating the most

criminal, the most titanic, and the most devastating war that our earth has ever known.

And what are our aims and purposes in entering the war? We have thrown ourselves into the war on the side of the allies because we have at last awakened to the fact that only by so doing could we save our souls. Our act, in the words of Mr. Viviani, the former Premier of France, "was the affirmation of our conscience, a reasoned approval of our judgment."

To speak more concretely, we have entered the war to re-establish the sanctity of treaties, that they may be something more than "scraps of paper;" to vindicate outraged international law; to restore the violated rights of man; to quell piracy and wholesale murder on the high seas; to make the world, in the memorable phrase of President Wilson, "safe for democracy."

We go to lift up, to comfort, and to save from despair Belgium, wounded, desolate, weeping for her children inhumanly slain; we go to rescue bleeding France, done almost to death by an unchivalrous and remorseless foe; we go to lift from England a part of her too heavy burden; we go to help all the nations whose freedom and existence have been put in peril by the insane ambition and brutal aggressions of a great imperial government which, forgetting its obligations to humanity, has outraged civilization by an unbelievably criminal misuse of its giant strength.

We have entered the war to put an end to war. For it is our irreversible resolve, as it is that of the nations in alliance with us, to fight for a lasting peace, the basis of which shall be the freedom and independence of all the nations, the small as well as the great; and the guarantee of which shall be a reconstructed, organized world, a world confederacy, a universal state, crowned by a supreme court for the enforced adjudication of all international disputes. We have entered the war to make the moral code of individuals the moral code of nations. We have entered the war to make order, justice and right supreme on this earth.

Such are the aims and objects with which, "with

malice towards none, with charity for all," we have entered the war, to the prosecution of which to a victorious conclusion we have solemnly dedicated all that we have and all that we are.

In conclusion, may I be permitted to add a personal word to those to whom this hour is especially dedicated. To several of you young men has come the imperious call of duty, and you have not been inattentive to that lofty call. With high resolve you have joined the hosts who have dedicated themselves to the defense of democracy, morality and right. Rejoice, young men, that you may have so intimate lot and part in the majestic work. Rejoice that you have so precious and supreme a gift—your strong, young manhood—to lay as a full sacrifice, if need be, on the altar of freedom and justice. Rejoice that to you has come this opportunity of making that supreme renunciation of self that lifts the soul to the glorious heights of complete self-realization.

And let all of us in this assemblage, inspired by this example of devotion to a holy cause, here highly resolve to do whatever lies in our power to do, that the sacrifices already made—sacrifices greater than those ever made before for any cause—shall not have been made in vain; that the moral world, treasures won by the travail of the centuries shall not be lost; that the splendid fabric of civilization, reared by the toil of the generations of the past, shall not be irremediably impaired; that freedom and justice and morality and righteousness shall not perish from the earth.